Ethics by committee

· Valorisation Addendum ·

This appendix considers the "knowledge valorisation" of this PhD-thesis. In 2015, I had an interesting experience as a participant in a panel of the History of Science Society organized by the Joint Caucus on Socially Engaged Philosophers and Historians of Science in San Francisco. The other panellists came from the United States, Australia, Mexico, and Taiwan. I started my contribution by talking about the emphasis in the Netherlands on 'knowledge valorisation' and how this informed my work. Already after a minute or so, however, an audience member raised her hand to ask if I could explain what I precisely meant with this strange word "valorisation". The term, it turns out, was hardly familiar to American academics. Indeed, judging from online word searches, 'valorisation' still seems to be a term that is used predominantly in the Netherlands to denote "the process of creating value from knowledge suitable and/or available for social and/or economic use and by making knowledge suitable for translation into competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities" (the definition of the Dutch National Valorisation Committee in 2011).

As a historian of science, it is worthwhile to point out that this Dutch emphasis on knowledge valorisation (and therefore also this valorisation addendum) rests upon a specific understanding of the social role and position of scholarship that is historically neither self-evident nor uncontested. For while scholars in most historical periods have either claimed or been asked to justify why their work is important, the recent Dutch emphasis on *societal use* comes forth out of specific government policies that were designed in the early twenty-first century to optimize 'the return on investment' of public research funds. After all, although it is frequently emphasized by politicians and policymakers that valorisation should be understood as "making one's research relevant to society" (a statement so general that it is hard to disagree with), the economic origins of the term shine through in the definition provided by the Dutch National Valorisation Committee, i.e., scholars in receipt of public funds and resources should specify the yields their research will deliver. And the more specific the product can be defined, the better the valorisation has succeeded.

The other panellists asked me in 2015 if it was not sufficient to explain that the funds invested in my PhD-trajectory served to develop my academic skills, which I would need later in my career to teach and produce further knowledge. I have talked about this argument with numerous Dutch academics since. Although most are sympathetic towards it, almost all doubt whether it will be accepted in a valorisation addendum as the sole reason for granting a PhD-scholarship. Of course, it is important for any scholar (PhD-scholar or not) to consider the relevance of their research. Yet, I do feel it is equally important to point out that the definition of valorisation used by the National Valorisation Committee and the requirement to let PhD-candidates defend their work in such terms are indicative of a worrisome trend in the Netherlands in which PhD-trajectories are increasingly commodified as ready-to-wear projects that may yield a predefined set of deliverables ('high impact publications', 'large data sets', 'competitive products', 'commercial activities'), rather than that they are understood as modest stepping stones towards durable academic careers.

Having said this, this PhD-thesis has argued that careful historical research of the reasons behind the emergence of research ethics committees is needed because history fulfils an important role in the present-day governance of human experimentation. The past is used to offer up moral signposts that are to nudge research and reviewers in certain directions and to stay clear of others; it is used to justify the existence of strict oversight regimes for human subject research; and it is brought to bear to frame the political function that research ethics today fulfil in the public oversight of human research studies. Hence, careful historical research is an important check on the current system of research ethics governance, to ensure that certain historical events and their political implications are not misunderstood—or worse, misused by calculating political actors to push through the policy measures they desire. For this reason, my research results are of interest to all those concerned with the contemporary governance of human subjects research, and particularly to those in policy.

In addition, this PhD-thesis addresses practitioners of health care and the biomedical sciences. Especially among members of these groups, it has become popular to complain that the practice of ethics by committee was forced on them in the second half of the twentieth century by 'zealous medical outsiders' who brought a bureaucracy of ethics into existence that is itself unethical. Yet, this PhD-thesis shows that, at least in the Netherlands, the practice was invented by quintessential medical insiders to force the therapeutic progress *they* desired on Dutch health care. Hence, that ethics committees strictly had to peruse research designs was not an unintended consequence of design by committee in a bureaucracy with red tape; it was a built-in mechanism to enforce a specific epistemic perspective on Dutch clinical research and practice. This forgotten function of the practice of ethics by committee is of interest to the larger science community as well. Although regulative institutions like research ethics committees are not often subject to elaborate scrutiny by science scholars, they have become obligatory passage points in the present-day infrastructure of science: locus of control that scientists first have to pass through before they can conduct research with human beings. Careful scrutiny of such institutions is needed to understand better how they have come to distribute prestige and power in international science systems in the late twentieth century, and have thus become crucial apparatus for deciding what and who counts as authoritative in the sciences today.

Finally, this PhD-thesis contributes to both public and political debates about how democratic societies wish to handle ethically contentious issues in science, technology, and health. It does so in two ways. First, by exploring the changing ways in which the governance of medical experiments with human beings has been dealt with in the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century, its chapters offer up multiple alternative vistas for governing human experimentation that may function as touchstones and points of reflection for the contemporary governance of ethically contentious issues in science, technology, and health. Second, this PhD-thesis recovers what went into the configuration of ethics by committee *as it did* in the Netherlands, and makes explicit which cultural conceptions of the role of medicine and medical science in society underlie this governance practice. In doing so, it shows that the Dutch government has typically sought to handle ethically contentious issues in science, technology, and health in the late twentieth century with an expertocratic approach both to the definition and to the resolution of public problems in these fields.

Professional ethicists, this PhD-thesis argues, came to fulfil a specific political function for the Dutch government in the late twentieth century in its quest to *depoliticise* ethically contentious issues in science, technology, and health. Particularly the latter chapters of this PhD-thesis may therefore be used by ethics practitioners as well in reflection of their professional and political roles in certain forms of governance in favour of others. In the Netherlands as well as in other countries, such reflection does take place from time to time, to which this PhD-thesis contributes some much needed historical reflection on the professional and political functioning of ethicists that goes beyond the idea that the discipline emerged in the second half of the twentieth century purely to hold physicians and (biomedical) researchers to account.

These findings have been disseminated at academic conferences, including talks at conferences of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health and the Society for the Social History of Medicine. In addition, I have given multiple lectures on the subject for large student audiences at both humanities and medical faculties, and I have given multiple talks at associations for medical professionals, including a lecture for an audience of over 200 physicians at the Nederlandse Internistendagen (Dutch Days for Internists). In 2016, I spoke at a public event in the Rode Hoed in Amsterdam on the topic of 'victims of medicine', and in 2018, my PhD-thesis will form the starting point of a two-day workshop on the governance of medicine and science in the late modern period that will include both international experts on this topic and relevant Dutch stakeholders, including medical practitioners, policymakers, and professional ethicists. My PhD-thesis has resulted in several publications as well, including peer-reviewed articles in *Studium*, the journal of the Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Science and Universities, and the *Dutch Journal of Medicine*, which is delivered weekly to the majority of Dutch physicians in the Netherlands. In the past years, I have also written multiple blog posts on the topic of my PhD-thesis for Shells & Pebbles, a popular online forum for the history of the sciences.

Finally, in 2016, I initiated and contributed to the first ever *Isis* Viewpoint on *The History Manifesto* and its implications for the history of science. In 2014, this highly influential manifest of authors Jo Guldi and David Armitage warned that history as a discipline was marginalising itself in politics and society (or, to invoke a Dutch word, could hardly boost any 'knowledge valorisation' anymore). The Editor of Isis H. Floris Cohen and I invited thirteen historians of science from all over the world to consider what—if any—implications *The History Manifesto* should have for professional historians of science, and asked Guldi and Armitage to comment upon their thoughts. In 2018, it remains the most downloaded collection of papers that has been published in *Isis*. While this Viewpoint is not directly a product of my PhD-grant, my development as an academic during my PhD-trajectory greatly influenced it. It is perhaps the piece of 'knowledge valorisation' that I am most proud of. For although I am critical of the idea that academics find their worth in "making knowledge suitable for translation into competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities", I do believe it is highly important for academics to critically reflect on their professional roles and responsibilities. If this counts as a form of 'knowledge valorisation' as well, my work in the past years hopefully may be found as "relevant to society".